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Perfect Love Casts out Fear

What do you do when your dream job becomes a nightmare? And you realize you've invested your heart, soul, and mind in an enterprise that has lost its heart? And the mega-corporation you work for disintegrates in disgrace before a worldwide audience? And your very identity is threatened?

These are the questions I started wrestling with beginning in 2001, as I witnessed the unthinkable implosion of two world class companies, both of which had been sources of great pride, meaningful employment, and ample income for me and many of my colleagues.

Actually, some of these questions had begun a year earlier, when for the first time in my career I faced serious consequences (instead of praise) for attempting to modify what I believed were erroneous business practices. Thinking they were merely the result of innocence and ignorance, I was devastated to discover that it was I who was confused. A skewed set of rules were in operation, and my refusal to abide by them quickly converted me from an asset to a liability. Instead of being fired, I was removed from my position and tasked with creating a new division in the company, one in which transparency was deemed necessary for its success. The result was a highly productive, harmonious, creative, ethical group of individuals who achieved the prescribed business goals.

Nevertheless, larger, destructive forces were in motion and the company collapsed shortly thereafter. Those of us who had spent years in the oil and gas or "energy" industries had already weathered waves of lay-offs, which came to be known by other names, such as "workforce reductions," "downsizings," "restructurings," and "rightsizing." But this was different. The causes of this company crisis were insidious and more complex than in prior downturns. The extent of these losses was unimaginable.

In the past, my response to hints of upcoming belt-tightening activities at the office was to work harder and quickly update my resume while contacting friends, mentors, and prospective employers. But I was already working too many hours and there were few desirable jobs this time, for the company's crash created ripples that reached the entire industry. Furthermore, something else was different this time: I was different.

A few years earlier I had attended my first Episcopal service as a favor for a dear friend and unwittingly fell in love at first sight with the church. I hadn't been a churchgoer at the time, and to my great surprise I became active in this one. My interests grew beyond my career when ministries like choir, vestry, stewardship, Education For Ministry, teaching, and praying the daily lectionary became essential components of my life. My husband and I were received into the Episcopal Church, and through participation in this loving community of faith I began to see the world differently.

I also began to see *myself* differently, which is why a new set of questions formed in my mind and heart when my workplace crisis first began. Instead of acting out of concern to maintain my income level and protect my career, I wondered what God was calling me to do next. The notion of "vocation" replaced the concept of "successful career" when I considered my work in the world.

Although my faith was not an inoculation against the fear I felt when almost fired, it was the antidote to the humiliation and despair that followed. This gift of faith provided the lens through which I reflected on that painful personal event and also the impending destruction of the

company. Through this Christ-lens I squinted for signs of new life. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

I prayed for strength and wisdom to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself” in the difficult work environment. My baptismal covenant gave me a deep sense of purpose, as did my attempts to affect the employee termination process in ways that would extend dignity and gratitude to those losing their jobs. My position also had a specified end date, signaling loss of income, no worthwhile job prospects, less severance pay than originally promised, and the end of my corporate identity and dreams. God was calling me to a sabbatical.

During this fallow time the grains of wheat that died began to bear surprising, unfamiliar fruit. They were a little scary at first, but in time they ripened and became delicious. Praise be to Christ who makes all things new, in whom we find our true identity and destiny.

Editor's note: The Reverend Stacy Stringer was ordained to the priesthood at Trinity Episcopal Church in Houston on February 7, 2009.